

HIGH ALTARS

THE BATTLE-FIELDS OF FRANCE AND
FLANDERS AS I SAW THEM

JOHN OXENHAM

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THE BATTLE-FIELDS OF FRANCE
AND FLANDERS AS I SAW THEM

BY

JOHN OXENHAM

*Author of "Bees in Amber," "The Vision
Splendid," "All's Well," "The
Fiery Cross," etc.*



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TO
ALL THE MEN AT THE FRONT
ALL WHO ARE MINISTERING TO
THEM AT THE BACK
AND
ALL WHO CARE FOR THEM AT HOME

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THE KEEPERS OF THE WAYS

But for those valiant souls who held The Ways,
This fate had been our own,
And in the fierce red rush of those first days
We had been thrown.

Honour the mighty ones who kept The Ways
At such stupendous cost,
And with God's help, and to the world's amaze,
Held that vast host!

Honour the gallant ones who held The Ways!
Let no man e'er forget
That, but for them, we were within an ace
Of this same fate.

Honour these younger sons who hold The Ways!
Britain, can you forget
All they have suffered?—Then, with heart of grace,
Pay your high debt!

HIGH ALTARS

VIMY RIDGE ¹

WITH all the fervour of my soul I wish that every man—yes, and every woman, in the kingdom could see with their own eyes, and feel with every uttermost sense which God has vouchsafed them, the things I have just returned from seeing, across the water there in Northern France and Flanders.

If only they could see it all they could not fail to be stirred to the very roots of their being; for, seeing, they would begin to understand what War really is,—what this war means in its menace to Life and Liberty and the very existence of humanity,—and what our men are enduring and accomplishing in their gallant determination to stem the evil tide. It is when the depths are in commotion that the soul is jerked out of its grooves and ruts, and forced, by sheer necessity for something stable to hold on to, to reach out to higher and deeper things—to bed-rock hold-fasts and fundamental truths.

Over there, our valiant ones are fighting the Devil and all his works as he has never had to be fought on this earth before. And if, in certain extreme cases, we have had to descend to his level and fight him with his own weapons, we have only done so

with extremest reluctance, with profoundest distaste and regret, and only when driven thereto by direst necessity when no other possible way offered.

War is a regrettable survival of barbarism. If the spiritual progress of mankind had kept pace with his material and scientific attainment, resort to arms as a means of settling disputes would long since have been relegated to the scrap-heap along with the duello and the stake.

Force is proverbially no remedy. And yet, if a maniac or a mad dog attacks one, force is the only possible suppressive, since reason is dethroned. You can no more prevail pacifically with a mad dog or a maniac than you can with an avalanche or a volcanic eruption. Intelligent exertion of brain and power may prevent similar future catastrophes. Passive non-resistance to the brute forces of Nature or devil-possession in man simply means extinction for the non-resister. War is an evil, yet life is a perpetual fight.

In the new life, after which the world is groping through the red reek of these anachronistic battle-fields, disputes will be settled on the lines of reason and common-sense, and mad dogs and mad men will be suppressed or controlled with loss only to themselves and not to the common weal of the world.

But even in the waging of war, civilised—or so-called civilised—nations had adopted certain rules which made for the restraint of the more evil passions inherent in man and inevitably stirred to undue activity by the clash of arms;—rules and conventions, such as the immunity of non-combatants, and the high prerogatives of humanity under the badge of the Red Cross, and many others.

In the Franco-German War of 1870-71 all such rules were very generally observed. It has been left for the mongrel German Empire of 1914 to rend them—and ultimately itself—in pieces, along with every other scrap of its ancient honour, and to present to a shocked and startled world the spectacle of a great nation deliberately casting aside its humanity, and glorying in barbarities which the lowest race of savages on earth would shrink from committing.

One wonders at times what the original founders of the German Empire—Bismarck, Old Kaiser William, Unser Fritz—the Crown Prince of gracious memory—and all the stalwarts who fought with them in 1870, must think of these over-scientifically-trained decadent descendants of theirs, who have trampled the flag of Germany into the filth and mire of such utter savagery that her very name stinks in the nostrils of humanity, and will do for generations to come. For those forbears of the race were men, and would have died sooner than descend to the level of wild beasts.

One wonders what nation on earth can ever call Germany friend again, or clasp her hand without the fear that the other hidden hand is creeping round her back to thrust in its poisoned dagger.

Whatever Germany gains or loses in this war she has lost her soul, her honour, her humanity. And what, therewith, would it have profited her though she had gained the whole world? That she will learn to her sorrow—and, let us hope, to her ultimate retrieval, as the years go by.

But that will take long, for she glories still in deeds which make the soul of the world shudder;—

and, amazingly and pitiably, so low has she sunk that she sees no wrong in her malefactions and cannot understand why every other nation on earth loathes and distrusts her.

The chance came to me of seeing something of the actual conditions of modern warfare on the Western Front and I took it eagerly.

It was late in the year—November—but on the whole the weather was kind, and it gave one the opportunity of judging to some extent what winter warfare must mean to our sons and brothers and friends out there,—though it was not then by any means at its worst.

As I have said,—I would that every man and woman in the kingdom could see what I have seen. But as that is impossible, a clear duty presents itself to me to show, to the best of my powers, to those at home just what it all means, what we are up against, and the amazing spirit of endurance, devotion, and self-sacrifice, with which our men are meeting it.

Within the circumscription of the Censorship the picture must necessarily be limited in details which one would like to fill in with most scrupulous exactness. But I will do my best to let you see just what I saw, without overstepping any bounds or conveying any intelligence to the enemy.

We were a party of four—S. —, H. —, M. —, and myself; three of us with some kind of title to be called “litt’ry gents,” as John Forster’s cabman would have put it,—the other, the head and moving spirit of a great higher-educational establishment doing very fine work in the world.

We had met the previous day at the Foreign

Office for final instructions and to receive our passports and "White Paper" open-sesames, had eyed one another inquisitively, and wondered how we would fit in. We fitted admirably and have become warm friends.

For passport purposes we each had to furnish four photographs. The comment of our genial mentor at the F.O. on my own—a snapshot taken with a Japanese screen as background—was "Too much screen. Too little Oxenham!"—I was ever over-modest and retiring.

But that matter was soon put right at the Consul's, where we had to be visé both by Britain and France. An official with big scissors sniped so vigorously and chancily that I exclaimed, "Look out! You'll cut off my head!" and he ominously replied, "Oh, they'll do that for you in France, maybe." And they very nearly did—or at all events in Flanders.

Travelling abroad in these days is made as difficult as possible for ordinary civilians—except for the relatives of the wounded, on their anxious and tragic journeyings,—and rightly so. Every inch of space and every pound of freight is needed for the prosecution of the war. Outsiders are not wanted and are better outside.

November though it was, the run to the coast was through a country smiling still, like a radiant old lady quietly happy and full of charm. For the sun shone brightly and the woods were gorgeous in russet and amber and gold.

At our port of embarkation even our White Papers availed not to dispense us of a formal appearance before a tribunal whose anxious enquiries as to

whether we carried any letters were satisfied by our decided negatives, and doubtless by the innocence of our appearance, and the fact that we were guests of the Government, and so, presumably, above suspicion.

On the crowded boat every passenger wore a life-belt. The results were at times comical when burly ones assumed their warmest wraps against the keen Channel air, and throwing them on on top of the belts lost any beauty of form with which Nature had gifted them and presented shapes grotesque and unshapely. But war-time necessity knows no artistic laws, and as we were all very much in the same boat no one smiled at his neighbour save cheerfully to express the hope that the crossing would be a good one.

A dirigible floated observantly in front, and on either side were vicious-looking destroyers ploughing for submarines, while minesweepers galore streamed to and fro, and between them all the passage was accomplished in safety. There was a wonderful amber and green and gold sunset with one bright star of Hope gleaming above the glow. It was dark before we got in.

Another examination by the authorities in the Purser's cabin forward, and we were at last free to go ashore, to be welcomed by our courteous host from G.H.Q., who had come many miles to meet us.

It would be a pleasure to dilate at length and in detail on the courteous hospitality accorded us everywhere. It all remains with us as a very pleasant and unforgettable memory. But that was not the object of our journey, nor of this record, and graver and grimmer matters press.

In sleight-of-hand-driven staff-cars we were whirled away through the night to Head-Quarters. Sleight-of-hand because, indeed, we seemed to do most incredible things in the way of swift right-angle turns and twists out of main roads into by-roads, with acute figure-eights and zigzags which left one's sense of direction miles behind.

The roads were excellent,—the endless serried rows of trees which lined the chaussées swam up into the dancing sweep of our powerful headlights and spread out on either side like the opening folds of a great white fan. For the strong acetylene lamps painted everything they fell on pure white, and men in khaki, mud-encrusted cars, yellow-washed cottages, and black tree-trunks, all shone momentarily radiant as we passed and then fell back behind us into their natural dinginess, dazzled by our meteoric passage.

At last, after something over an hour's run—and there is no speed limit in France—the lights of the Château gleamed in front, at the end of a long avenue of ancient trees still thickly clad. It is a fine old family mansion, standing remote from the world in the heart of a wood, with the usual farm-buildings at one side and a true Norman farm-yard like a small fortress, in which were byres and pig-sties and hen-coops, all occupied, and a covered well of size. In the rooms were family portraits dating back to 1649, and pieces of tapestry, fine old black oak furniture and much ancient china.

The great staircase branched at the top to right and left, and of the comforts of the bedrooms and all other rooms I can speak with feeling.

On the ground-floor are the dining salon, a large reading and writing-room full of war-literature, a

still-larger smoking lounge, a museum of present war-relics and curios, a small concert room, and various offices.

The museum was intensely interesting,—shells of all sizes up to the very largest, empty shell-cases polished up and made into sweet-toned gongs and water-jugs; German weapons and tools of all kinds and sizes, the armour-plate in which their snipers are clad, the devilish little pump-machine carried on the back for squirting liquid fire, more devilish in intention than in actual fact,—a Lusitania medal glorifying that most infamous and never-to-be-forgotten deed—a full-sized model of a “Kamerad” with his hands up, asking for mercy a moment after he had been slaughtering our men;—and a thousand other things, and many photographs of the battle-fields. To the museum one returned again and again and always discovered something new.

Bath-water came up early next morning, and when the military servant flung back the curtains I could see through the long windows the cows grazing peacefully under the trees of the park.

Not one sound or sign of the war reaches the Château from without. It is remote and safe, but most decidedly neither unfriendly, melancholy, nor slow. Pleasanter resting-place no man could wish, and the return to it each night after our tiring tramps over the battle-fields, was the brightest spot in our day's doings. After the cruel wastage and raw desolations of war, the all-pervasive mud, the meandering duck-boards, the misplaced and venomous humours of the barbed wire which everywhere lay in wait in the tall grass and tripped us whenever possible,—the Château, with its blazing wood

fires and wide hearths, was an ideal place to come home to.

Breakfast—and then, strong-booted and well gaitered and macintoshed, with steel helmets and gas-masks beside us, we were speeding away again in the cars, through well-tilled country and comfortable-looking Norman villages, unreached by the actual tide of war, but occupied only by old men, and women and girls, and children trooping to and from school, and by our boys in khaki—fresh-faced and clean-shaven, standing-by till the call came for the Front.

But our swift progress soon carried us beyond the war-tide-market into the vast wastes and desolations, whence the tide has at last ebbed—not of its own accord,—rather should I say—has been swept back by the fiery broom of the Allies, but it has left its savage mark wherever it touched.

No more placid villages—instead, little heaps of dust and calcined stone and charred wood by the road-sides; no more smiling country-sides,—instead, stark, black, bristling wastes; no more trees—well, yes, there were trees, but they were an eyesore,—the flayed skeletons of trees, whole forests of them, without an inch of bark, a few still stretching out the white bones of their shattered arms as though invoking pity and vengeance, mostly just blasted trunks shorn off short, and some of them still showing dud shells protruding from their carcases. Those blasted forests were everywhere. The contrast between them and the autumn glories of the woods at home and at the Château wrought deeply into our minds.

And ever present in our hearts was the knowledge

that but for the good providence of God, and the valour of the men who held the ways at Mons and Le Cateau, at Le Quentin and La Fère, this might have been our lot at home. Kent and Surrey, Essex and Suffolk might have been even as these. Gratefully and fervently, we thanked God that it was not so, and wondered why we had been spared these horrors. Not of our deserts surely!

We ran at last swiftly into Arras—the City of Death,—ran through its deserted silences with bated breath—gazed out at the raw piles of brick and rubble which once were houses, some with their roofs come down bodily, looking as though the twisted ruins had tried to hide under them for safety;—at the gaping holes which once were windows whence children's faces peeped, and the black yawning gaps which had once been doors through which living men and women passed with cheerful “bon jours!” and stood and chatted with their neighbours;—at the fragments of shops where flourishing business once was done.

Then the fiery tide of war swept over them. And war is Hell—and here we had full proof of it, though still fuller proof came later.

I do not remember seeing one single soul of the 25,000 or 30,000 inhabitants who once lived in Arras. Many no doubt had been killed. The rest were gone—scattered to the winds.

In the Market Place—and oh, the joy of a Norman Market Square in normal times!—the whole frontage of one side was gone, as though a mighty axe had cleft off the faces of the houses and left bare what lay inside. Up in the fragment of a third-storey room stood a baby's cradle, with a woman's

skirt still hanging on a nail. In other rooms pictures hung on the walls, and in one I saw a piano.

Six-feet-high parapets, formed of the débris from the upper storeys and utterly smashed buildings, were erected along the side-walks for the protection of the cellars when the unfortunates were driven to their last refuges. Across the Square one gable wall of what had once been a church still stood, and in the hollow of a window very high up, and silhouetted against the light, stood the figure of a man holding a child in his arms—S. Joseph probably.

We came to the Cathedral—not, I believe, a very original or imposing building when alive, but pathetic beyond words in its death and in the feeling of savage desecration its remains evoked. We climbed the cumbered steps and stumbled over the rough disjaskit heaps of masonry, ten or twenty feet below which lay the tessellated floor.

One piece of wall still stood solid. On it was the great wooden crucifix untouched, with the pathetic figure of Christ looking down on the ruins below. And one gable end still stood, also surmounted by an iron crucifix.

Similar immunities have been noticed in many of the ravaged churches. Explain it who can, one cannot but note the significance of the fact,—“The Cross still stands,”—even in these representations of the greatest tragedy of all. And, though the world seems bent on material ruin, deep down in the troubled heart of it—“The Cross still stands!” and will in due time stand supreme.

In one wind-sheltered corner of the ruins the pipers of a Scottish regiment had assembled for practice, and their merry skirling and droning made

music in some of our hearts. In another long aisle, the floor of which was pierced with yawning black holes leading down to the vaults in which many had taken shelter, a company of signallers was practising Morse telegraphy with a small flash lamp.

And from the shelter of that one standing wall by the apse, the silent Christ looked down on the tangled ruins, and in the pitifulness of His extremity seemed to be asking again,—“This have I done for thee. What hast *thou* done for Me?” According to our lights we were all doing our duties to the best of our powers, but the Pax Dei and the Higher Life seemed very much awanting amid those stark and shattered fragments of His house.

The fine old Town Hall lies a forlorn and tumbled heap, save one small corner, the contrast of which with the rest brings sharply home to one the object lesson of the enemy's barbarity.

We skirted tottering buildings and great crater-holes, and made our way to the Officers' Club, in an ornamental garden where many roses were still in bloom though this was November.

And it was good to see the imperturbable cheerfulness of the boys,—they were all boys, and fine specimens too—down out of it for a few hours and enjoying to the full such amenities of civilisation as a few miles back from the Front can offer.

Then to the cars again and a swift run through desolate and deserted country-sides, dotted here and there with pathetic little enclosures of white crosses, till a long grim slope rolling up to the sky-line hove in sight on our right,—Vimy Ridge!—a name of bitter gallant memory to many of us. That long

grey-brown slope was bought with a price, and the price was high,—beyond all human computation.

Vimy!—For the winning of that desolated rolling down, and all that the winning of it meant, men had died in their thousands and tens of thousands. And it looked it. There was a brooding melancholy all about it as though the spirits of those who had fallen still hovered round this high altar of their sacrifice to see what had come of it,—as though the young hot blood of them still called for vengeance on those whose soul-less self-seeking had wrought this evil. We went sadly and heavily and full of thought.

“Helmets and gas-masks, gentlemen!” was our Staff-Guide’s order, as the cars drew up. And we obediently discarded caps and hats, slung the masks over our necks, and donned our steel dish-covers. They were heavy but not so uncomfortable as we expected. Then we started to climb the ridge.

“Gas-masks to top button!”—which brings the flat square parcel close under one’s chin ready for instant use—was the next order; and then one of us quavered plaintively:

“It’s all very well to have them ready for instant use, Captain, but not one of us knows how to put the thing on.”

“Quite time you did then!”—and there on Vimy Ridge we had elementary gas-mask drill, and made extraordinary exhibitions of ourselves endeavouring to imitate our leader, who was an old hand, though young in years, and had fought over all the fields to which he took us.

The ground was slimy chalk, slippery and sticky with a morning shower. The grass grew rank and was laced everywhere with treacherous tangles of

rusty barbed-wire, which scored one's boots and sent one sprawling. To surmount a hummock three feet high was a hazardous proceeding. The more you strove to climb the more you slipped back. Everywhere were great crater holes filled with slimy greenish-water. Get into one and you would probably never get out. Heavily laden men, going up and down, got into them when the fighting was on and never got out.

Here and there were the remains of barbed-wire entanglements many yards wide, and underfoot were mouldering cartridge-belts with the clips still full, and empty shrapnel-cases, many pine-apple hand-grenades, and here and there shells of size, which our cautious guardian would not allow us even to poke with the point of a stick. One good Boche helmet I came upon, and was stooping to pick up, when I saw it rested against a rough wooden cross, so there it remained.

And, here and there among the rank grass and the treacheries of the rusty barbed-wire, were vivid red poppies, blooming bravely in spite of November weather. They looked like little clots of blood. There were other small wild flowers also, white and yellow, and I picked a tiny bunch for the sake of some at home to whom the very name of Vimy is a sacred memory,—a memory of gallant deeds and merciful escapes, and a perpetual evoker of fervent *Te Deums*.

We crawled and scrambled on up the grim ridge, across fallen-in trenches and dilapidated dug-outs,—many of them, blasted to pieces by our heavy shells, become now probably the graves of their former occupants,—and, choosing a reasonably dry “better hole” on the further side, we lay there gazing through our

field-glasses at the wide-spread plains beyond,—at Givenchy, at Vimy village—or rather where these had been,—there were only a few charred sticks left,—and out to Lens with its battered red-brick houses sprawling at large about its tall chimneys and pit-heads,—and over the mighty slag-heaps that looked like the Pyramids, to the faint towers of Douai, due east.

Here we lay long, watching the shells which screamed over our heads falling and bursting in the German lines, and their shells bursting in ours.

Many aeroplanes came speeding back towards us and at times were surrounded by what looked like sudden flocks of other planes but turned out to be bursting shrapnel. None of them paid any heed to it but just carried on at top speed with their messages. They seemed full of business and pressed for time, and there was something joyous and exhilarating in their swift, graceful, unperturbed flight.

Captain L. examined each one carefully as it approached, lest it should prove Boche, with an evil mind towards onlookers on the ridge and a drum of bullets for their curiosity. However, none came. Not one single German plane did we see that day.

The sun shone out brightly at times, throwing into high relief the hollow-eyed red houses of the plain and in Lens very vividly. All afternoon the shells, from the camouflaged guns away back behind us, screamed overhead and burst white about and beyond the distant houses, where the advance lines of Britain and Germany are within touch almost. And from many miles back in the German lines their shells came over and burst presumably on our lines.

But we were miles away from them, and fortunately no gas-shells came our way.

Here and there, as we came and went along the dolorous Ridge, we chanced upon great monumental crosses standing high on well-built cairns—one very large one to the Canadians who did such mighty work here,—lasting memorials of devotion to duty and the Motherland. This great Ridge of Vimy is truly an altar bathed in the rich red blood of thousands of high and gallant hearts.

And again and again, as we stood and gazed subduedly over the grim waste—with almost a feeling of sacrilege at standing there as mere sightseers where our brothers had fought and died,—the thought came surging over us that, but for these, and those before them, this horror of desolation and of death might well have been Suffolk and Essex, Kent and Surrey.

How shall that everlasting debt be paid?

Then, as the afternoon began to wane, we slipped and stumbled down the slimy ways between the crater-holes to our waiting cars, full of long, long thought. The very silence was impressive, when we strove to picture what this grim ridge must have been like under the fiery hail of shells rained upon it by our guns, and again when our men swept over it, leaving their grim trail of dead behind them and exacting a still greater tally in front. Every one of these slimy pits and crater holes represented a blasting explosion and the rending and tearing of men. Now, their sullen silence was the silence of death. And Death himself it was that scowled up at us out of them as we passed—Death, with menace yet in his gloomy half-veiled eyes.

There was a mournful sense of wastage and futility and desolation about it all that struck cold on the heart. But it is not futile. Sacrifice for a great ideal is never wasted. From the red blood shed so freely here shall rise the fair white flower of a new life—a newer, larger life in which war will have no place.

We had been invited to take tea with the General commanding the First Army and his Staff; and a long swift run along new and most excellent roads, past endless cemeteries full of little white crosses gleaming ghostly in the twilight, and past some so vast that we could not see the end of them up the darkening slopes, and we whirled up to his Head-Quarters, in a château akin to our own only smaller.

The hospitable welcome accorded the mud-covered pilgrims from the outer world will never be forgotten by any of us. We were received with hearty good cheer and made to feel at home in a moment. Greater kindness and more charming courtesy were never extended nor more appreciated. And when in a few minutes we were ushered into the salon for tea, the contrast of that glowing room with what we had just come from fairly took one's breath away. Vimy,—sullen green crater-holes, vicious tangles of barbed wire, rank grass, slippery slime, a vast tumbled sweep of brooding melancholy under a darkening sky, and those innumerable white crosses!—and that bright salon in the old château, with its long oval table gleaming with snowy napery, with glass and silver and china, and huge bowls of red and white chrysanthemums the size of saucers, all lit up by the warm rich glow of crimson-shaded

lamps!—it was like coming suddenly out of the shadow of death into full, rich, pulsing life. A memory to be treasured! Glowing ruby-red with us for ever is the memory of the General of the First Army and his Staff.

Before we left, the Padre took us along the duck-boards to his little corrugated-iron turtle-back church, and among other things charmed me by telling me that after Vimy fight 4,000 men gathered round and sang with gusto my hymn "For the Men at the Front." It was good to hear it right there on the spot.

Then, hearty farewells to the Château and its gracious inmates, and another long swift run through the night to our own Head-Quarters and dinner, and much talk over the great fire of logs in the smoking-room afterwards.

And so, as the good Pepys would say, "To bed, with one of the great days of our lives behind us, and the hope of greater still to come."

VIMY RIDGE

Tread softly here! Go reverently and slow!
Yea, let your soul go down upon its knees,
And with bowed head, and heart abased, strive hard
To grasp the future gain in this sore loss!
For not one foot of this dank sod but drank
Its surfeit of the blood of gallant men,
Who, for their faith, their hope,—for Life and Lib-
erty,
Here made the sacrifice,—here gave their lives,
And gave right willingly—for you and me

From this vast altar-pile the souls of men
Sped up to God in countless multitudes;
On this grim cratered ridge they gave their all,
And, giving, won
The Peace of Heaven and Immortality.
Our hearts go out to them in boundless gratitude;
If ours—then God's; for His vast charity
All sees, all knows, all comprehends—save bounds.
He has repaid their sacrifice;—and we——?
God help us if we fail to pay our debt
In fullest full and all unstintingly!

BEAUMONT HAMEL

NEXT day we started early for the battle-fields of the Somme. A long run through living country, where the villages still stood upright and were occupied; where children still trotted to school, and priests in long soutanes and shovel-hats lent an air to the proceedings; where there were cattle in the pastures and tractor ploughs on the corn-lands,—till, bit by bit, these were all left behind and we were in the dead-lands once more,—the lands swept bare by the fiery tide of war, and we came at last, after a look round Gommecourt, to Beaumont Hamel.

Captain L. had fought here and knew all the ground like a book. He took us over our own lines and the German lines, into dug-outs and trenches, along duck-boards through the gardens of the château all cratered with shell-holes, and out over No Man's Land on to the grim desolated wastes where the fighting had been bitter and bloody. And often he stood and looked round on specially remembered spots with eyes full of knowledge and painful reminiscence.

The salvage men had carried off almost everything worth saving, even to the boardings of the trenches and dug-outs. The trenches were still well-defined but much fallen in, and seemed small compared with the work they had had to do. Their narrow proportions brought home to one the difficulties of passage for gear-laden men or stretcher-bear-

ers. The dug-outs were mostly dilapidated. But one we went down some sixteen steps into, cut out of the solid chalk, was in good condition and still contained a very decent bedstead strewn with hay, and had possibly been used by some of our salvage men. It had a gallery running perhaps a hundred yards to another outlet. An industrious mole is the Boche, but full of venomous guile.

When the owner of the château heard that the Germans had been driven back, she exclaimed with joy, "Now I can go back home!" But by that time nothing was left of the château but the front gateposts and a handful of tumbled stones and many great holes.

As we stood by the great mine-crater which crossed the German trenches, looking out over the scored and pitted wastes of the countryside towards the flooded Ancre, and Grandcourt and Petit Mirau-mont on the opposite bank, every inch of which was won by our men at such terrible cost, a friend at my side said quietly, "It reminds me of a Scottish moor. But a Scottish moor is full of life, and here there is nothing but death, death, death."

And again—and overwhelmingly—there came upon us the thought that, but for the good providence of God and the mighty valour of those men who had held the ways, this which we were looking at might well have been our lot at home. Suffolk and Essex, Kent and Surrey might have been—nay, assuredly would have been—blasted desolations like these, if by any means the evil powers could have compassed it, and—unless the fleet had managed to stop it. So, once again, most fervent gratitude to the men of Mons and Le Cateau, and St. Quentin and La Fère,

and all the good and true men since who have paid with their lives and limbs the price of our safety at home! That is a debt which none of us can ever forget—surely! And yet—and yet—in other days such debts *have* been forgotten. And they may be this time unless we see to it.

Very striking and peculiarly pathetic features of the landscapes, here and elsewhere, were those stricken forests,—great stretches of what had once been the gracious greenery of woodlands, now gaunt, naked trunks without so much as one patch of clothing bark on them; bleached and bare, hideous bony skeletons of trees, lifting their pitiful appeal to heaven; here the splintered fragment of a broken arm forking out, there a trunk half-severed with its bristling crown sweeping the ground; every bole pitted with shell and shrapnel—here and there a long dud shell half-buried in the trunk as though trying to get in to hide from the fiery hell outside.

Dropping into the road that runs along the valley of the Ancre near Beaucourt, we ran past Hamel and Aveluy into Albert, from whose church tower the golden Virgin, who stood upright holding aloft the Infant Christ until the Germans came, is bowed down now at right angles, as though eager to cast Him down into a needy world,—as though indeed she were saying—“Little Son! Little Son! See then what has come of all our travail!”

And below, all the mighty traffic of war goes ceaselessly on. Heedless?—I would not say; but upon one passer-by at all events I can answer that the discomfited Virgin of Albert made a deep impression and remains a lasting memory.

In a half-ruined building is the officers' club,

where, in their off-times, the stalwarts from the Front can shed the mud and flavour of the trenches, can eat and drink and smoke and talk in comfort, can have hot baths and be barbered, can see the papers, and enjoy the society of their fellows, and it is never empty.

A right goodly company they were, remarkable chiefly for their youth and confidence, and a certain quiet regardlessness of the dangers amid which they lived. Every man there, except ourselves, was probably just back from the Front or just going up; and at the Front Death stalks large and free and claims his toll haphazard and without warning. Any man of them might be dead within twenty-four hours, but they showed no more thought of it than they would have done in their clubs at home.

Here, or at one of the other half-ruined towns, we saw the men's bath-house, in what looked like the remains of a brewery; where they bathe wholesale, leaving all their clothes at one counter and slipping into an adjoining room rigged up with overhead hot sprinklers. They are allowed three minutes to soap and wash off.

"Short commons," said one of us. "How do you get them out if they want a bit longer?"

"I turns on the cold and they 'ops quick," said the Sergeant in charge, with reminiscent chuckles.

At another window they receive complete dry rig-out.

"But suppose they don't fit?"

"They always fit," laughed the Sergeant. "There's only one size in the army,"—which, if not literally correct, conveyed a sufficiently-clear impression that

over-squeamishness in detail was not according to the regulations.

Then, past Contalmaison and Pozières and Courcellette, we sped to Bapaume. And Bapaume is The Abomination of Desolation—a murdered town, branded, every inch of it, with the foulest mark of the Beast.

Murdered—because here had been no bombardment from either side; there had been no military necessity for its destruction, no reason in the whole devilish business but sheer, and truly damnable, malignity.

Beaten on the line of the Ancre, the Germans were forced to evacuate Bapaume. They took their beating badly. Fritz has been fashioned into a redoubtable fighting machine, but his best friend—if any such is left him; it is hard to imagine!—would never call him a sportsman. He cut down every fruit tree. He went into every house, and with bomb and torch and fire-pill left Bapaume a blackened ruin.

I cannot explain how, but those black gutted ruins of Bapaume have about them an air different from any elsewhere. It was as though the evil spirit that prompted that senseless savagery still hung about the place gloating over its work.

In one place we stood on the ruins of the Town Hall—the only building the wretches left intact when they retired. It was, however, mined, unknown to us, and a few days later blew up, burying such as chanced to be inside. No, the Boche is no sportsman! He has sold his soul, and his god is frightfulness. But the end is not yet, and treachery

and brutality are boomerangs that always come back at their flingers' heads.

Bapaume—like Rheims, and Louvain, and Ypres, and the Lusitania,—leaves a grim black-red stain on the name and honour of Germany which she will find it hard to efface.

I have been reputably informed that the medal struck to celebrate the sinking of the Lusitania is dated one day before that most cold-blooded atrocity was committed. If it is so it is on a par with the gas-masks dated 1913—one year before the war—which have been found in the German trenches. Foul work, my masters!—and Germany wonders why the whole world distrusts her!

Tea in the Officers' Club, the only spot with any approach to cheerfulness in all that great charnel-house of Bapaume, and as the night fell we were speeding homewards, along the well-kept roads, with the endless lines of elms and poplars swimming into the dancing fan of our headlights and whirling past into the darkness behind.

And away to the east the sky was one continuous blaze from the big guns—exactly like the flash-lightning of our electric trains at home on a damp or frosty night,—but here was added the sound of the distant guns and the continuous twinkle of blue shell-stars, which shot up every here and there, and hung and floated and disappeared.

Each day and everywhere, despite our staff-cars and the ægis of G.H.Q., we were stopped by peremptory sentries, who stalked out from their roadside boxes with rifle and bayonet and demanded our "White Paper" passes, scrutinised them and ourselves carefully, took down our names and addresses

with stubs of pencils in damp and crumpled pocket-books, which made us feel like poachers or trespassers (which latter we were), then courteously signified that we were at liberty to proceed, and doubtless gazed after us full of wonder that anyone not actually required to be out there should be such fools as to come.

The cordon round the Front was most rigorously maintained, and we knew the necessity and were glad to see it so effectually carried out. We also wondered what would have happened to us if we had neglected the notice on the wall by the front door of the Château, ordering us without fail to bring our "Open-Sesames";—shot at dawn maybe, and buried in the high-piled mud heaps by the roadside.

But as we sped homewards in the dark that night the cars came to a sudden halt, and after some talk outside all our lights were extinguished and we crept slowly along in pitch blackness, finding our way heaven knows how—instinct, perhaps, on the part of our miraculous chauffeurs, or possibly the cars had the roosting instinct and could smell their garages forty miles away.

Presently we were threading the narrow streets of a ruined town, and that was the weirdest drive I ever had.

It was black as a tomb. A tomb it was in fact. Here and there blacker gaps in the darkness showed where houses had been. The streets were crowded with men in khaki. Once or twice a dim brown light trickled out from under a sack which covered a doorway, and made the darkness on each side of it more solidly dense.

We grunted slowly along, and as far as I know killed no one. It was marvellous. I could not have driven a car there to save my life.

Very slowly we crawled out at last on the other side of the town, and a mile or so beyond were allowed to light up again, and endeavoured to make up for lost time.

When we reached the Château, to my intense joy my boy was there awaiting us.

In conversation the previous night with our most courteous host, Captain R., he had learned that my son in the R.F.C. had just come out, but was not yet posted to a squadron, and was not very far away.

"You would like to see him again?" he asked.

"Would I not? We said goodbye to him at home ten days ago,—for the last time, it may be."

"I'll send over for him to-morrow and he shall have dinner with us."

And I thanked him for that great courtesy as you would have done. No kindlier thought could any man have shown. For partings in these days are pregnant with possibilities.

So—grim and ghastly as had been some of the things we had seen that day, it ended, for two of us at all events, in highest joy. And here again I record my deep gratitude to Captain R. for his most kind and considerate thought.

BEAUMONT HAMEL

Is it the sigh of the night-wind in the grasses,
The long rank grasses that grow so tall and thin?
Or only the cry of a night-bird as it passes
On wings of fear this field incarnadine?

Is it the soft low rustle of the garments
Of those high souls who nobly laid their all
On this grim altar of unnumbered torments,
And won to Life through deaths heroical?

Is it the sob of Earth in deadly sorrow
At the red flood that chokes her hidden ways,—
Sick with her longing for the fruitful furrow,
Faint with the memory of bygone days?

Is it the voice of God within us, calling,—
Deep unto deep—the God without, within,—
Bidding us loose our souls from their enthralling,
Moulding His Peace through this sore discipline?

HELL-FIRE CORNER

WE started early one morning, and by way of Hazebrouck and Poperinghe came to Ypres,—the first civilians allowed into that hot salient since the push, I believe.

The dear picturesque old town is sorely battered and broken. We drove straight to the centre of the offence—the Cloth-Hall, and, duly arrayed in our steel helmets and gas-masks, climbed its pitiful ruins into the interior, and stood with sick hearts gazing at these tumbled fragments of what had once been a whole world's glory and delight.

Two of our party were reluctantly permitted to go off to the Menin Road on a sacred personal mission. One of them had lost a son at Ypres and he desired, if possible, to find his grave.

It was a risky business. Huge painted signs in the Square indicated their way to "HELL-FIRE CORNER." They went off with Captain L., and I and another of our party wandered back into the Cloth-Hall for a further look.

We were standing in what I imagine may have been a great central chamber, but there were only here and there fragments of the walls left and vast heaps of rubbish underfoot. At one end an officer in khaki was seated on a camp-stool before an easel, busily painting. Two Australian soldiers wandered past us, and scrambled over the piles of débris into a further ruin,—the Cathedral, I think.

And, as we stood gazing about, there came the mightiest sharp ringing crash I ever heard, right in my ear it seemed, and before my stunned brain fathomed what it was—indeed, coincident with the bang, something whizzed close overhead with a *WHEW-EW-EW-EW*,—and fell into the place where the Australians had gone. Then there came a huge explosion in there, and against the boiling white smoke and clouds of dust I saw the silhouettes of the Australians as they came scrambling out like cats.

We were altogether too surprised to feel any fear. I have no consciousness of one quickened heart-beat, nothing but a feeling of intense surprise.

My companion even suggested that if we went inside there we would probably find a very fine shell-case to carry home as a souvenir.

And as I was telling him he was quite welcome to it, there came again the same tremendous bang, right in our ears, and coincidently another shell sped over us and fell with a roar into the same heap of rubble in the inner room.

Then our feet were loosened and we sped for our lives to an officers' dug-out close at hand and found the artist already there. He knew enough to linger not on the order of his going when Fritz turned nasty, but had sped to cover at once.

We were told afterwards that the Germans took it into their heads to fling a few shells into the Cloth-Hall now and again just to show that they were still alive; and also that the peculiarity of high-velocity shells is that the sound and the shot travel at the same speed and reach you at the same moment. And that I can confirm, for the sharp staccato

thunder-clap of it sounded as though the shell had been fired in the Square outside instead of many miles away, and the overhead whizz came at exactly the same moment.

At the time, I say, we felt no sense of fear, though at the second hint, when observation had shown us what that new weird sound implied and portended, instinct carried us to cover as quick as our legs could go. It is only when recalling it since, that, with awakened understanding, I have seen how very near to death we were, and have contracted a distinct fear of, and distaste for, high-velocity shells.

Had that gun been deflected by the millionth part of an inch we would have been scattered into fragments. If those two shells had not miraculously missed any of the standing bits of masonry and fallen into the rubble-heap of that inner room, we might have been buried. As it is we live to tell the tale and to be mighty thankful that it was no worse.

The others of our party returned unsuccessful from their search, and as the atmosphere of Ypres seemed to us decidedly unhealthy, we got into our cars and sped away to Locre for lunch in the Officers' Club in the refectory of the great convent there.

The long room was hung round with pious mottoes in Flemish—"Who gives to the poor lends to God," and so on, and by way of relief had a well-painted dado of regimental badges which were pleasing if somewhat incongruous.

The place was full of cheerful bright-faced boys, who presently gathered round the piano and sang comic songs, with coloured paper lamp-shades on their heads to lend additional grace to the proceedings.

Outside, the ambulances were rolling up all the time, and the wounded were being carefully carried in straight from the field, their hastily stripped-off gear following them in bundles.

After lunch, one of the pleasant-faced lay-sisters who served us asked, "Would you like to see ze grave of Major Willie Redmond?"—and as we had come with that intention they both tripped across the muddy road with us to their garden, and led us up to the far end where Major Redmond lies at rest beneath heaped white flowers, with a root of sham-rock just planted at his feet from Mrs. Redmond's garden.

"He was a noice man," said one of the sisters, as we stood bareheaded round the grave, and that was the universal opinion of all who had known him out there. Another great soul sped for the Great Idea. Requiescat in pace!

Then we sped away towards the Front again—to Messines and Wytschaete, of which comfortable little towns but pulverised heaps of brick remain.—Not one stone on another of the Convent,—nor of the Pump-Mill, which treacherously began to swing its arms as the London Scottish marched in for their first fight that dim November day in 1914. Three full years of bitter warfare and here we are still at Messines, though now Messines is but a name!

But things have changed since then. Now we are on top, and well Fritz knows it,—and his soul-less taskmasters still better.

Not far from here, as we waded towards the Front, all along the line the big guns were keeping up a perpetual cannonade. We could hear the roars behind us and see the flashes, but so deftly are they

all camouflaged that exact location was difficult. At times one would belch its thunder close at hand, but before we could spot it it had discreetly withdrawn under cover, while the busy gunners behind filled it up with fodder again for its next effort. And over our heads the great shells were screaming so loudly that one stood and watched and tried to see the sound, but never succeeded.

Our careful guide, who knew the country and the ways of the Boche from long personal experience, again proclaimed the spot to which we had gradually worked our way "unhealthy." Our guns were bombarding heavily, and at any moment the enemy answer might begin. So we turned and made for the rear and an atmosphere less charged with unpleasant possibilities.

All this countryside is another vast waste of indescribable desolation, save for the mighty traffic of war; and its overpowering and omnipresent feature is mud. Mud almost up to the knees, churned into porridge by the passage of innumerable heavy wheels, and multitudinous horses' hoofs, and the heavy tramp of Britain's conquering legions.

Kemmel Hill dominates all that country on the one side, and on the other I counted fifteen of our sausage balloons all continuously watching the enemy lines, while one solitary distant German sausage kept watch on ours. Our aeroplanes also were speeding to and fro, heavily shrapnelled at times, but we saw no casualties, nor any German machines.

Some one among us wished we might see a scrap in the air. But our guide, Captain L., who had seen many, shook his head and quietly remarked that he had no desire ever to see another, for the sight of

the loser crashing to earth was poignant, be he British or Boche.

The great red-brick château of Kemmel stood uninjured among its tall dark trees. It belonged, we were told, to a German. His tenure, it is to be hoped, is ended for ever.

Before leaving Messines, we scrambled up among the crater-holes to the greatest hole of all—where one of the seventeen big mines was successfully fired. It was almost like looking down into the crater of Vesuvius. A young friend of mine, a round-faced boy of twenty, already a captain, has just received his Military Cross for defending that mine when hordes of Boches came over, with gun-cotton packed on their backs, to spring it on us before its time.

He told me an odd thing, by the way,—that often, when they captured German trenches and dug-outs, they found in them English eatables, and among them were Palethorpe's Sausages, Ross's Ginger Ale, Colman's Mustard, and "Black and White" Whisky. One would like to know how they got there.

At Kemmel, Captain L., who had held trenches and fought over all these fields, told me a curious thing. He said that in April and May, whenever our big guns began their heavy music the nightingales all round about piped up immediately, and the louder the guns the louder the nightingales sang, as though bent on outdoing them.

There again was cause for reflection. For without a doubt the nightingales were right in the instinct that prompted their effort. As sure as day follows night so surely Peace shall prevail over War, Right

over Might, and the song of nightingales be more enduring than the sound of the heaviest guns.

History always repeats itself; and never, in all the long and chequered tale, has the World-Troubler or the Would-be-World-Conqueror come to anything but final ruin. From Pharaoh in the Red Sea, to Napoleon on St. Helena, their end is the same. God never intends one man to rule His race. And so, when his time is up, will the Hohenzollern prove it to his cost, and will add one more to the great historical object-lessons. May it be the last!—and may it be soon!

The world is sick of autocratic rule and the soulless sway of would-be despots. It is the people who suffer in all wars. It is they who pay the price. It is they, henceforth, who will see to the calling of the tune. Despots are anachronisms, and anachronisms cannot survive the steady march of Time.

Captain L. also told us of getting one of the scares of his life when out on patrol between the lines one night. A covey of partridges whirled up suddenly from underneath his very feet, and gave him such a shock as all the Boches in their trenches or out of them could not have done.

Partridges were fairly common in No Man's Land, and one day both he and his sergeant fired at the same bird, and both hitting it there was no partridge left.

Proof of their prevalence even yet, in spite of all the traffic and clamour of war, was afforded us that same evening as we raced home, a covey rising with a sound like machine-gun fire on one side of the road, speeding before our car, and disappearing over the fields on the other side.

We scrambled at last down the narrow slippery tracks of the ridge by Wytschaete, with barbed-wire and dud shells and live shells scattered all about, to our waiting cars, mightily thankful for the comfort of their swift easy progress after the clogging weariness of the mud, and did the forty-mile run home to dinner in a little over an hour.

M—U—D

This is an Ode
To

M—U—D—Mud!

Mud the ubiquitous,

Mud the iniquitous,

Mud—you're the limit in life's vast adversities!

Mud the all-prevalent,

Mud the malevolent,

Mud! to the deuce with your ill-timed perversities!

Mud, you most wretched old

Combine of wet and cold,

What were you made for, Mud?

Sure you weren't prayed for, Mud!

What is the use of you?—if this abuse of you

Could end the sluice of you—Mud, you'd be dud!

Ill-suppressed, chill-infest, de'il possessed Mud,

You're—no—good!

For it's—

Mud on the ground, and mud in the air,

And mud in your grub, and mud everywhere;

Mud in your mouth, and mud in your nose,

And mud in your boots, and mud 'twixt your toes,

And mud,—O my Tailor! the mud on your clo'es!

It's mud in your ears, and mud in your hair,

And mud in your tub, and mud—everywhere.
It's mud in your bread, and mud in your bed—
(If you happen to get one, I'll bet it's a wet one!)—
It's mud in your eyes, right down to their sockets,
It's mud in your rifle, and mud in your pockets.
It's mud Cockney bykes with each kyke that he
mykes,

And Taffy is fuller of mud than he likes.
Pat says, "Now, be jabbers, it's worse than the pig!"
And Chow-Chow and Hindoo go out on fatigue.
It's mud on the mewels, and mud on the 'osses,
And mud in the graveyards, and mud on the crosses.
It's mud on the tractors, and mud on the bikes,
It's mud on Lord Topknot, and mud on Bill Sykes.
It's mud in the gutters, and mud on the dykes,
It's mud on the Scotties, and mud on the Tykes;
You've mud in your tin-hat, and mud on your head,
You're mud while you're living, and mud when
you're dead.

There's mud on your temper, and mud on your soul,
Just mud—the beginning, the end, and the whole.
And when you go dud to a new neighbourhood,
Then all that is left of you's buried in mud.
But the rest of you's clean; yes, the best of you's
clean,

As it never has been since your face first was seen
In this quivering, slithering, gas-poisoned, withering,
marrow-bone shivering
Land of dud mud.

BACK OF BEYOND

A LONG every road behind the lines we passed endless columns of our khaki-clad stalwarts, all in their steel helmets, and with their gas-masks braced up ready for instant use, for every here and there were large painted signs "GAS ALERT," as indications of what might be expected.

The men, laden with their gear, tramped sturdily on through the mud and carried a good deal of it with them. Their field-kitchens, smoking cheerfully, accompanied them, and guns and limbers and ammunition wagons; and everywhere there were light narrow-gauge railways running up into the front lines, and everywhere endless convoys of great motor-lorries laden with rations and shells—food for the men and food for the guns—and all the needs of a vast army; and great tractors with caterpillar wheels hauling mighty guns—some to the Front, some back to the repairing shops;—and now and again long strings, fifty in a line, of motor busses laden with men wanted quickly at the Front.

We had so much ground to cover, and had to travel so fast, that there was no chance of speaking to our mud-covered brothers of the road—as we would have liked to do.

I can see many of their faces very clearly yet, for I watched them intently to see what spirit was in them. And—weary as they obviously were with their long tramp through that endless mud, bearing

their heavy packs and arms and helmets,—on every fresh clean-shaven face was a look of indomitable resolution to see the business through. Obviously it was not a job they liked or would have chosen. But being in it, and knowing what it all meant, they were making the best of it and very obviously meant business, now and hereafter.

On the tramp there were no signs of gaiety,—gleams only at times among the happier goers on the busses or lorries. But when we waved them good luck and safe deliverance as we passed, every face would lighten up, and nods and smiles, and bright looks of recognition of our appreciation of them and all their mighty labours, were given us everywhere. Our hearts went out to them more than they could know or we could possibly show.

All these myriads of men, snatched from their wonted labours of production,—all this mighty manpower, meant for up-building, turned to purposes of destruction by the devilish ambitions and treacherous machinations of a handful of unscrupulous autocrats who had sold their souls in hopes of winning the world! How long, oh Lord, how long shall these things be? Not long, we hope; and never again, most fervently we pray.

Surely, if there is any justice in heaven or under heaven, somewhere and somewhen, the men who brought this evil on the world will meet their rightful due, and their punishment will be proportioned to their crime.

Doubtless we were all, in our degrees, to blame. The great slide was not confined to any one nation. But to one nation alone was it given to plunge the whole world into war purely for its own selfish

aggrandisement, and to wage that war with a cold-blooded ruthlessness and heartless savagery hitherto unknown to man. And for that there must be a reckoning commensurate with the offence. "The Lord God of Recompenses shall surely requite."

Everywhere—back from the Front—were huge camps with fancy names—"Redvers Camp," "Bullers Camp," "Trafalgar," and so on; and here the boys, clad in striped jerseys just as at home, were busy at football. Everywhere were great Ammunition Dumps, and Lorry Parks, and Ambulance Stations, and Hospitals. And on all the older battlefields were huge Salvage Dumps, where everything worth retrieving, even the hoardings of the trenches and dug-outs, was collected in mighty piles for further use.

On the salvage stations, and on the roads, scraping the latter with Sisyphean patience, and not much greater success, were gangs of Chinese, Indians, and representatives of many other nations, but with all their labours mud was still the most prominent feature of every road up there.

But, indeed, the everlasting wonder was that any roads made by mortal man could stand the incessant grind of that tremendous weight of traffic. Night and day without cessation the mighty Juggernaut of War rolls on, shaking the earth in its progress, crushing it and humanity into the mud of Flanders and Northern France, in this year of grace and sorrow, 1917,—and the outer nations are impressed into the service of so-called civilisation to rake its mud into the gutters—gutters five feet wide and six feet deep—and to fling it thence over the fields beyond, which

once bore food for man,—and will do yet again, some time.

It sets one thinking furiously; and the burden and climax of one's thought is that never again while this world lasts must these things be. And be sure that that is the animating and overpowering purpose in the hearts of these myriads of mud-caked men,—the great idea that enables them to stand the unparalleled and little understood or appreciated hardships of their lot,—that this grim tax on the energy, the strength, the very life of the world, is being paid by them—not willingly, but of direst necessity—so that never again shall such things be,—so that life shall henceforth be freed for ever from the crushing burden of arms, and that their children, if not themselves, shall be able to live as God meant them to live, to the making of life, not its breaking.

And, if one may judge by the faces of the men we passed on every cumbered road, any power that sets itself to oppose that righteous aim will be trampled into the mud and ground as small as the slime beneath their sturdy feet.

Overpowering too was the thought of what the world could have accomplished if it had set itself to making, with the dynamic energy with which it has set itself to this breaking;—if all these millions of men and untold millions of money, and all this brain-power and organisation had been bent to upbuilding instead of downcasting. Oh, the waste, the waste, the untellable, the irretrievable, the immedicable waste of War!

This all-too-long-drawn-out strife has given its chance to the Army Service Corps and set it high in

the esteem of the men at the Front. The multitudinous and never-relaxing energies behind the lines—from the very front line right back to the coast—fill one with amazement and a kind of bitter pride;—amazement at the wonderful organisation—the brains and brawn that keep it all going and never fail the Front;—pride that an unwarlike nation like ourselves has proved so full of initiative and so capable in unwonted ways;—bitterness at the necessity of diverting all these mighty powers from the building up of life to its temporary destruction. But before you can rebuild even an old house the former structure must be pulled down, and the ground cleared, and new foundations dug, and laid firm and sure for that which is to be built upon them. And that is what we are doing. It is a dirty job but it has to be done, for the old House of Life was in an evil case and like to fall upon us and bury us in its ruins.

It takes, we are told, thirteen men behind the lines to keep one full-going at the Front. And well we could believe it.

Time was, and not so very long ago, when the A.S.C. was looked upon by the fighting-men as a cushy job—a kind of dug-out for those with a tender regard for their own skins. But no man thinks that now. They also serve whose only and never-ending work it is to keep the actual fighting-man fit by supplying his every need. And their high service is as taxing and as valiant as his, and at times as full of risk. The A.S.C. has come into its own and deserves the very best that can be said of it.

One of my friends in the London Scottish, who has miraculously—maybe as the result of very many

prayers—passed unscathed through those hells of fiery days in the last two full years—told me that it was simply amazing how, after a fierce rush and a hard-won advance they would always find their rations neatly laid out and waiting for them the moment the rush was over. All honour to the thirteen indefatigables behind who make it possible for the valiant one in front to fight on a full stomach!

The Stretcher-Bearer, too, has won rightful recognition. His job also was at first looked upon by the more militant as a soft one and a refuge for non-fighters. But no man out there would say that now. General Birdwood, of the Australian Force, said one day that if he had one hundred Victoria Crosses to bestow he would give them all to the Stretcher-Bearers for their fine devotion and unselfish labours. Close up behind an advance they go, and bind and pick up the wounded as they fall. Maybe it takes as much nerve and courage to do that, without any of the thrill of battle or the fierce joy of getting back at the enemy, as it does to follow the barrage.

As I have said, we had little opportunity of speaking with the men. We could see that times were arduous with them apart from the actual fighting. They are probably, in spite of all alleviations, infinitely more trying than any of us at home can possibly imagine. Even when, at too rare intervals, they do come home, they have very little to say about it all, and still less about the hardships of winter campaigns and the stress and gloom of life in the crater-holes and trenches. One of my padre friends refers to this reticence as "one of the most wonderful conspiracies of loving silence the world has ever

known. I am amazed," he says, "that they not only stand it but are cheery and see the funny side of things." It is to avoid distressing the home-folks, and the result at times is that the home-folks are inclined to think that the men at the Front are not having such a bad time on the whole.

That is a mistake. They are sorely tried. The measure of their greatness is the magnificent endurance with which they bear it all. If you had seen the actual conditions you would understand better. That is why I wish every man and every woman could go out and see with their own eyes. Their hearts would be profoundly stirred. Some of them would begin to think as they have never thought before. If we all did that, and acted on those deeper and better thoughts, the end of the war, and of War, would be in sight.

When one remembers that these fighting-men and toiling-men of ours were not bred up to war,—that two and three years ago they lived sane and fairly comfortable lives amid safe and easy surroundings, their transformation and amazing self-adaptation to these new conditions of elemental life and death fill one with supremest wonder. They lack everything which formerly made life worth living to them, save the bare necessities, yet they are hard and fit and grimly cheerful.

Even amid the charred desolations of those utterly ruined towns we met everywhere signs of their determined effort after amusement and escape from the palling rigours of their lot. On tottering walls and crumbling gables were roughly-fashioned invitations to lighter things—"Cinema at 8 to-night. Don't forget it!"—"The Pierrots are here"—"The Bing

Boys"—"To the Sing Song"—and so on. And every here and there, in the quaintest and most unexpected places, the cheerful Red Triangle of the Y.M.C.A. smiled out at us as we passed, and offered its welcome to all who would. Our friends of the Staff could not speak highly enough of its work among the men, and that was good hearing.

And wherever, in any town or village, a tiny shop still proffered its wares—no matter what—even barber's sundries—the way the men gathered round to gloat upon it, like bees on a comb, was somewhat pathetic and distinctly touching. Obviously, anything was good after the mud and the trenches.

The Padre at First Army Head-Quarters asked me to make known the intense craving of the Men at the Front for letters from home. He had, he said, censored many thousands of letters and nearly every one of them plaintively asked—"Why don't you write oftener?"

To our men out there—in that atmosphere of mud and grime and all things unhomely—the home letter, no matter if it deals with the most trivial things, is like a ray of sunshine, like a warming fire, like a cordial to the heart. It is the little things that make up the joy of life—the little things of home round which the great affections cling, and which the hungry heart craves and finds relief in.

The Officers' lot has its palliations in the—in their various degrees—comfortable little clubs which obligingly turned up everywhere to provide us with lunches and teas;—and tramping the slimy ridges and desolate wastes of the battlefields produces famous appetites. In all of them cheerful, determined faces abounded. They might be just out, or just

going in, or only down for a few hours off,—they might have escaped many deaths an hour before—or be knowingly off to face their chances again in an hour's time. They might miss well-known faces—and receive the quiet final answer to their enquiries after them. Their own faces might be missing next day,—but, one and all, they were possessed of an indomitable cheerfulness which neither loss nor risk could cloud, and enquiry as to how they felt about things round there always elicited a quiet, unboastful, but quite unequivocal, "Oh, we're absolutely on top here. We can beat Fritz every time."

Russia's lamentable default, and Italy's sudden bend, were admittedly set-backs and spelled extensions of the war, but the end of it all no man doubted for one moment.

Among all the wonderful activities behind the lines mention must be made of the Repair Shops, where every single thing salvaged from the battle-fields is made fit for use again if there is any fitness left in it. From mighty guns, which need caterpillar tractors to drag them, to boots whose owners have no longer any need of them, nothing at the Front is wasted. The expenditure is terrific, both in life and material. When an objective is to be gained there can be no stinting. But there is no unnecessary waste out there, and the fragments—of humanity and material—are carefully salvaged and put into good repair and use again if that be at all possible.

In one place across there, is a Bakery, where a Master Baker in charge of a thousand men, bakes 350,000 2-lb. loaves every day. Pharaoh's Chief Baker would have had little time to dream of birds

and baskets if he had had 700,000 lbs. of flour to bake each day.

And when visitors enter that huge bakery with their Staff-guide, the Chief of the Bakers shouts in stentorian tones, "'Tention!"—and every man stops on the instant, whatever he is at, as though suddenly petrified. "Carry on!" says the Staff-Officer, and work is resumed at the point where it stopped.

Every road down to the coast is thick-packed with a never-ending stream of transport-wagons, motor-lorries, busses, caterpillars, haulage of all kinds; and, for the weal of the men at the Front, the mighty machine must go on and on without any stoppage. If an axle breaks or a wheel crows up, the loaded wagon, bus, tank, whatever it may be, is shoved into the nearest ditch and traffic is resumed. I believe only so many minutes are allowed for the operation. Schedule time must be kept. Then, later, a salvage party comes along and the lame duck is repaired and sent on its way, with a parting curse for its unpatriotic delinquency. At night the lights of the convoys by the road-sides are like the lamps of Edgware Road or the Old Kent Road,—and don't the drivers wish they were!

Enquiries as to foot-trouble among the men, who have at times to stand for hours in water halfway up to their knees, elicited the fact that each man is responsible for his neighbour's feet—Number 1 attending to Number 2, and so on, and that frequent massage with a special preparation has reduced the trouble to a minimum.

I asked an officer friend how he managed about his own, and he laughingly explained that he always carried three pairs of socks—one on his feet, and

one in various stages of drying in each trouser pocket, and constant rotation of the three pairs kept him fairly right.

I came across a new verb—to souvenir. A German prisoner, brought in wounded, was asked by one of his helpers for a souvenir. "I have already been souvenired," was his reply, and apparently the first souvenirer had done his work very thoroughly.

I must say a word of grateful admiration for our chauffeurs. Their driving was beyond praise. Many of the roads were very fine, including the new ones laid by our own men. But some, cut to pieces by the traffic, were about as bad as they could be. That tyres and springs and axles could stand them was constant source of amazement. One of our tyres went as we whirled towards the Château the first night, but our man fixed on a new wheel by the light of his lamp in record time. And once, on an unusually crowded road, a transport-wagon suddenly barged out of line and took off the brass cap of one of our hind wheels. Our driver picked it up and, failing in his efforts to replace it, bandaged the bruise with leather and wire, and it seemed to make no difference in our going, though, as I was sitting over that wheel, I had visions as we whirled along of a sudden default which would leave me squatting in the mud.

And the only thing we killed in all those swift runs—in spite even of that weird drive in the pitch darkness through that dead town crowded with boys in khaki—was one silly hen which hurled itself under our wheels as we sped through a village, and I looked out of the back window just in time to see

it on its back, kicking wildly in a cloud of feathers, when the second car mercifully finished it off.

Out there at the Front, among the men at all events, life becomes very definitely objective. The things that appeal to the outer senses are the things that bulk and count,—life, death, food, drink, smokes, shelter, rest, mud—moral and physical, and anything that will divert one's thoughts from, and so palliate somewhat, the general unpleasantness of life. And—the great redemptive that covers a multitude of sins—friendship.

More great deeds—most wonderful acts of selfless devotion—have been done by pal for pal out there than the world will ever know. Unconscious of anything extraordinary in their doings, men whose attempted expressions of their feelings would be disguised in language at times utterly unprintable and appalling, have risen to heights of unparalleled devotion and self-sacrifice, and have done it in their stride, so to speak. Have done it simply because "he was my pal," and because the sportsman in him—a fine elastic term which, fully probed into, explains much of the difference between Germany and all the nations who are up in arms against her—told him it was the right thing to do, and he did it instinctively. Men have died out there for their pals like very Christs, though their pals who survived would have gaped at you, and probably jeered, if you had said as much.

Which of us, with one arm shattered, would have sat in a trench half full of water for two and a half days, holding up the head of a pal whose legs were smashed and useless, lest he should drown;—and

only come down to have our own wound seen to when at last the pal died?

There are many such stories recorded in the Book of Golden Deeds up above, but the world will never hear them. That one was told to me by the first man who spoke to the survivor when he came down three days after Messines; and the man who did that great thing was not conscious of having done anything out of the common. But the thought of that two and a half days' starving vigil, and the agonising weariness of the long awful nights, bites deep into one's soul. Talk of the Knights-of-Old and their vigils before the altar! What were they compared with that?

As we ran for the coast on the last day, we were surprised to meet long-drawn-out squadrons of Cavalry,—actually Lancers with their lances cupped in their stirrups and pointing high above their heads, and others, all wearing their flat steel helmets and gas-masks. And we said to one another—"What's the meaning of that now?"—for lances struck one as somewhat incongruous and anachronistic in these days of guns that carry fifteen and twenty miles.

But a few days later the mystery was explained, when we heard of the gallant deeds of the cavalry in General Byng's dash over Siegfried, and knew that we had been eye-witnesses of the quiet gathering of his forces for the great leap forward.

SUMMING UP

TO sum up one's impressions of that kaleidoscopic vision of the Front.—

The things that remain most vividly in my mind, and come back again and again as I thread the bustling London streets, or walk the peaceful, unmartyred country lanes, are,—

First.—The vast and cruel desolations, pitted with shell-craters full of slimy green water, from which Death and the Devil looked sullenly up at us as we passed;—vast cruel desolations which, until the curse fell on them, were rich and smiling country-sides;—the vicious tangles of rusty barbed-wire;—the pitiful appeal of the blasted forests;—the handfuls of smoke-grimed dust which had been happy villages;—the melancholy ruins of what had been prosperous towns;—the slaughtered churches and still-standing crucifixes;—and the insistent and ever-present remembrance that, but for the good providence of God and the valour of our men, all these horrors might have been ours here at home.

The only way, it seems to me, in which one can view these awful fields of war and still retain one's own faith and sanity, and one's elemental belief in the sanity of one's fellows and the essential goodness of God, is to regard them in all reverence as mighty altars, on which, for the sake of a great ideal, mankind has proved itself equal to the supremest of all sacrifices. "Greater love hath no man than this;"

—and therein lies our hope for the future of the world. It has shown itself ready to die for the betterment of Life.

As regards the destruction of churches I feel bound to add that, according to our Staff-guide, it was, from a military point of view, inevitable—and therefore not specially deserving of commination, apart from the general facts of war. If you must have war you must accept the consequences.

As we climbed the ruins of Arras Cathedral, my feelings got somewhat the better of me on the subject, and he quietly explained that every church tower was, in enemy eyes, a possible observation-post, and so not permissible.

Secondly.—The misery of the raw, cold, clammy life of the trenches and crater-holes, and the ubiquitous mud.

One of the little Lay-Sisters who served us at Locre said,—

“We are *so* sorry for the poor boys this winter. Last year they were warm in the trenches, now they have only the crater-holes.” The trenches had not struck us as particularly inviting abodes, but undoubtedly crater-holes are worse.

Thirdly.—The marvellous organisation and stupendous and unceasing activities behind the lines.

And lastly—though anything but least—the immense courtesy and unfailing kindness extended to us everywhere and at all times—except by those two Boche shells in Ypres Cloth-Hall.

As we sat talking after dinner, in the Pullman, on our way back to London, one of our party—the Vicar of an important West End Church, among other activities,—propped his elbows on the table and looked

across at me and asked, "And when do *you* think the war will end, Mr. Oxenham?"

And, propping my elbows on the table, and looking him square in the face, I said, "Just about the same time, I imagine, as you think it will end."

And he nodded gravely, and said, "Yes, I think we think alike in that."

And what we both meant was this.—We recognise that the world is suffering a supreme scourging, but we recognise also that the world deserved and needed it. We do not look upon this war as a punishment sent of God—except inasmuch as all suffering is sin's own punishment. And punishment for all our falling away from the higher things we all undoubtedly deserved—and needed.

We regard this that has come upon us therefore—simply, yet complexly—as the natural and inevitable outcome of the evils we had allowed to grow up, both in the State and beyond it, without any attempt at their suppression, or even any word of expostulation. Even the Pope and President Wilson could stand by and watch the murder of Belgium without one word of protest. We brought this well-deserved punishment on ourselves therefore, and all punishment, in intention at all events, is preventive and educative,—is intended to stay the ill-doing, and to lead to a desire for better things.

Are we, as a nation, learning our lesson? Is the world learning it?

Until we all do so the war will probably go on.

Just as we feel that *our* work will not be fully accomplished till Hohenzollernism and Militarism and Despotism generally are all completely annihilated, now and for ever, and that despite the further

suffering and sorrow this may entail upon us, we cannot stay our hands until they are,—so our own suffering may have to continue till our own defects are eradicated.

A sharp check and a round twist were necessary unless we were all to go headlong to perdition. The check and the twist will cost the world probably twenty million lives—the very flower of the nations,—untold millions of broken men—and treasure of all kinds beyond our computation or understanding.

When it is all over the world will be incomparably the poorer—and so it may find itself incomparably the richer.

It depends entirely on itself—and on each one of ourselves.

This war we believe to be intended to turn us as a nation, and the world as a great family of nations, back to God. Until that high purpose is fulfilled we may have to go on suffering. And better so than that, through any treacherous half-peace, we should sink back into the slough of selfish ease from which our awakening has been so drastic and so rough.

TIME'S ALTARS

B.C. 1914

Red on the altars lay the sacrifices,
Red ran the channels in those olden days,
When, from the judgment of his ill devices,
Man sought redemption and the means of grace.

A.D. 33

Christ by the Cross redeemed a whole world's sinning,
Counted as naught the anguish and the pain,
Gave Himself wholly for the hope of winning
Life from the burden of its self-wrought chain.

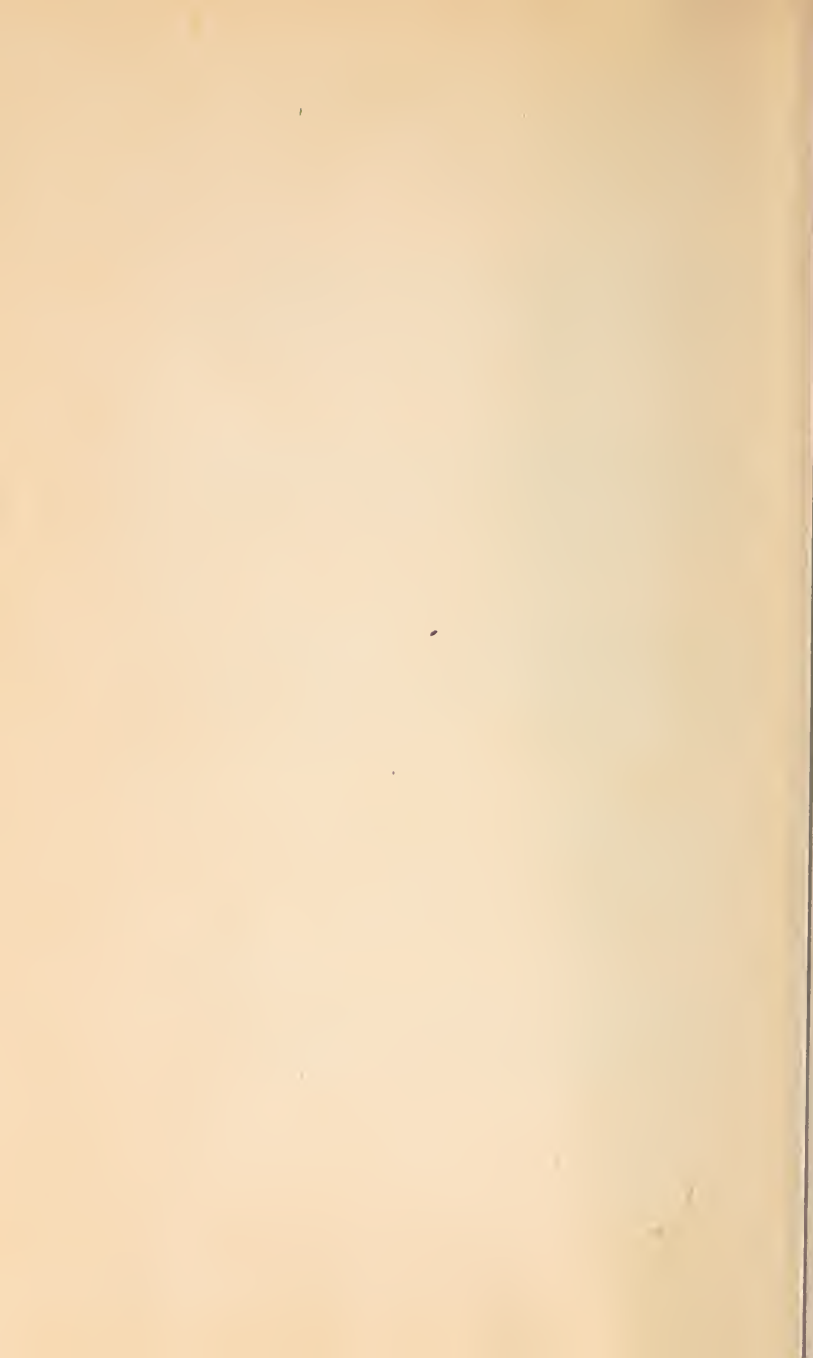
A.D. 1914-1918

Now, once again, the sacrifice is rendered;
Now, once again, the altars run with blood;
Will the new life, of this vast woe engendered,
Root out the evil,—bring the greater good?

A.D. 19—

If not,—if still the things of earth enthrall us,
If this sore lesson we still fail to learn,
Then, of a surety, shall still worse befall us,
Till unto Him with contrite hearts we turn.

Can we not read the meaning and the warning?
Are we so dull that blows alone will save?
Must Life for ever be a House of Mourning?
Can we find God but in an open grave?



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